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Why Soviets worry about cruise missiles

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Of all the new "theater" weapons the United States proposes to deploy in Western Europe to counter Soviet strength, the cruise missile is the one causing both the Western critics of the program and the Russians the greatest concern.

In all, 464 ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs or "glickums," as they are pronounced in Pentagon jargon) would be positioned by 1982 on fixed or mobile launchers in Italy, West Germany, Britain, and Belgium — or any other Western European NATO nation that might accept them.

A cruise missile is a relatively small, pilotless jet aircraft programmed to fly a prescribed route to its intended target. NATO cruise missiles would be capable of delivering nuclear warheads on objectives in the western Soviet Union.

Soviet leaders, from President Leonid Brezhnev on down, have argued that deploying the mix of GLCMs and about 108 Pershing II fixed-trajectory medium-range missiles is an effort to circumvent provisions of the SALT II treaty, still unratified by the US Senate, which would fix essential nuclear-weapons parity between the US and the USSR.

"Are these [new] plans," asked a Soviet television commentator, "not so much plans for saving Europe" from heavy Soviet missiles aimed at West European targets, "as they say in America, but plans to circumvent the SALT II treaty and to create a superiority to the benefit of the United States after all? This is in fact a violation of the SALT II treaty."

Soviet and Western critics of the plan add that mobile-launched cruise missiles further violate arms-control accords because it is difficult or impossible to verify their whereabouts and numbers, unlike missiles in fixed silos.

US administration sources reply that although the Soviets may have to strain their own intelligence-collection methods a bit to spot the cruise missiles, "national technical means" of verification, including satellites and other methods, are adequate.

NATO governments have shown apprehension over the possible effect on inter-allied cooperation of a SALT II ban (in a protocol to the proposed treaty) on longer-range GLCMs and sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs or "slickums"). These limits, they have argued, might set a precedent for future constraints in the new arms-limitation agreements with the Soviets which the Western allies would like to negotiate.

The SALT II protocol bars deployment of cruise missiles with ranges over 600 kilometers (373 miles) until the end of 1981. The GLCM the US wants to deploy in Europe — an Air Force version of the General Dynamics-Convair cruise missile — could have a much longer range. However, it could not be operational until 1982 at the earliest, Pentagon scientists say.

Nevertheless, as a staff report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee points out, "because the protocol appears as a concession to Soviet fear of advanced US technology in the field of cruise missiles, some among the allies worry that the US will be under great pressure to extend the limits to prevent the delay of negotiations on central systems" (including the big Soviet SS-20 and US Pershing II missiles).

Therefore, European analysts argue, the expected future SALT III talks with the Soviets will see dogged Soviet efforts to extend the protocol restrictions as far beyond 1981 as possible.

The US is developing air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs or "alkims") as well as GLCMs and SLCMs. All use the same warhead, a 200-kiloton nuclear bomb developed originally for a missile designed to be launched from the North American Rockwell B-1 bomber. President Carter vetoed development of the B-1 for budgetary reasons in 1977.

The US cruise missile is steered to its target by an inertial guidance platform, periodically updated by a sensor system called TERCOM (terrain contour matching), which causes the missile to skim the earth's profile below the level of most radar detection and to detour around obstacles.

The Air Force will choose between Boeing and General Dynamics models of the ALCM, now competing in a 10-trial test flight series.

Three of the Boeing AGM-86B tests were terminated prematurely, whereas two out of the six General Dynamics AGM-109 flights crashed after launch.

Tests were to be completed by Jan. 4. The Defense Department would like to have the Air Force purchase 425 GLCMs, through 1985.

Western intelligence analysts believe Soviet cruise missiles are inferior, with only about 400 SS-N-3 "Shaddocks" capable of flying more than 70 miles. About 200 are carried aboard aging "Echo-2" submarines. A new follow-on to the Shaddock — the SS-NX-12 — has an effective guided range of about 300 miles.